Chapter 1

Scene Song: "Fire In My Heart" ~ Escape From New York

The morning after his birthday arrived in Pelmont bright and beautiful as ever, the sky outside a flawless blue, the sun already warm, the air carrying that impossible eighty-degree softness that made every day here feel like summer refusing to die. By somewhere around eight-thirty, Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal was already installed on Sasha's sofa like he paid utilities there. He sat half-leaning into the corner cushion with one leg folded up beneath him, his deep glossy white cereal bowl balanced easily in one hand, the little painted crown on its side catching the morning light.

Around the rim, in gold lettering, were the words **SIR LORD MORNING MAJESTY**, which Jimmy had decided only minutes after opening it the day before was one of the finest objects ever crafted by human or afterlife hands. His matching spoon clinked against the bowl as he ate cereal with complete satisfaction, watching television with the intense seriousness of a child and the posture of a minor king. First came *Teletubbies*, as always, then it was *Power Rangers*.

Jimmy, dressed in a tracksuit and chains, hair laid perfectly, tiara nowhere in sight this morning but his full Sir Lord energy otherwise intact, watched the opening of Season 1, Episode 1 with narrowed, interested eyes as if he were studying something culturally vital. When Sasha came into the living room, already showered and dressed for the day, she stopped dead in the doorway and just stared at him. He didn't notice at first. He was too busy eating cereal and watching brightly colored people fight evil in matching suits. Sasha folded her arms.

"Why in hell," she asked at last, "are you watching *The Power Rangers*?"

Jimmy glanced over at her slowly, then back to the television, like the answer should have been obvious to anybody with functioning senses.

"Because," he said, scooping up another spoonful, "despite malicious rumors to the contrary, I do not watch *only* Teletummies. I contain multitudes."

That made Sasha laugh. Jimmy pointed with the spoon toward the television.

"Look at this. You've got color-coded drama, costumes, overcommitted villains, morally obvious conflict, and people flingin' themselves about like they're in a cocaine-fueled karate opera. It's quality. It reminds me of the first time me and the Jimmies met Spike."

Sasha laughed and came farther into the room.

"Wait—a cocaine-fueled karate opera?"

“Aye,” Jimmy said. “And don’t pretend you don’t see it. It’s pure camp violence for children. I fuckin’ respect it.”

Sasha shook her head, smiling.

“I could never stand Skull, though,” she said.

Jimmy’s mouth twisted into a faint smile.

“Neither could I.”

Sasha moved toward the kitchen and called back over her shoulder:

“I had a conversation once with the actor who played Skull. He was an asshole.”

Jimmy faintly frowned, though he was still watching the TV.

“I can believe that.”

“Really?” she asked. “You can?”

“Oh, yeah,” Jimmy said, taking another bite. “That sort of face doesn’t fuckin’ happen by accident.”

Sasha laughed harder from the kitchen doorway. Jimmy went on, growing more opinionated now that the topic had opened properly.

“And Skull and Bulk together are exhausting. They’ve got the energy of two bastards who’d mock a miracle because it wore the wrong fuckin’ shoes.”

That got a full laugh out of Sasha. Jimmy pointed at the screen again.

“They fuckin’ irritate me on sight. If I were in that show, I’d have thrown both of them off a fuckin’ cliff by episode three.”

Sasha leaned against the kitchen arch, laughing.

“Episode three?”

“I’m being generous,” he replied.

She shook her head and went into the kitchen to start coffee. The house settled briefly into easy morning sounds. Television dialogue. Spoon against bowl. Cabinet doors opening. Coffee being measured out. Outside, palm fronds shifted lazily in the warm breeze coming in through the cracked kitchen window. Then there came a knock at the front door. Sasha looked up at once, frowned, and went to answer it. When she opened the door, her friend, Jamie (Foxx), stood there in sunglasses, a fitted shirt, a single gold chain around his neck catching the light, all easy swagger and bright energy as if the morning itself had decided to show up with a grin.

“Sash!” he said, opening his arms. “What’s up, girl?”

“Hey, nothing, we missed you yesterday at Jimmy’s party,” she replied while hugging him.

“Yeah,” Jamie said, “I had to wrap up something with this film I’m in—but I wanted to come through—*but*, that’s why I’m here now, and—I heard I could find Jimmy over here.”

Sasha laughed lightly.

“Yeah. Of course you can,” she responded.

“Mm-hmm,” Jamie said, slipping inside. “I said let me go on over there and see if the birthday king up in there eatin’ cereal in borrowed royalty.”

Sasha shut the door behind him, already smiling because there really was no correcting that. Jamie walked into the living room and found Jimmy exactly where he should have expected him: one leg tucked up, cereal bowl in hand, *Power Rangers* on the television, chains on, expression intense. Jamie stopped, stared for a beat, then burst into amused disbelief.

“Man, what in the afterlife Saturday-morning-ass situation is this?”

Jimmy slowly turned his head toward him, raised his brows, and gave him a pleased little smile.

“Jamie, hey,” he responded.

Jamie came farther in, all full energy now.

“Hey, man, you wanna hit the club tonight?” Jamie asked.

Jimmy blinked once, then he turned more fully toward him, brows going up higher, smile widening with immediate, excited curiosity.

“*Really*?”

“Yeah,” Jamie replied, “I’m dead serious.”

Jimmy sat forward a little.

“You mean like a *nightclub* club?” Jimmy asked.

Jamie smiled.

“Yeah, a nightclub club, not no church basement, not no two-step rec room, a real club. Music, lights, drinks, people lookin’ expensive for no reason. I figured that’s my gift to you. I’m invitin’ Remmick, a few others, we makin’ a night of it.”

Jimmy was off the sofa in a flash.

“Okay!” Jimmy exclaimed.

But before the word had even fully landed, Sasha came hurrying in from the kitchen, eyes wide.

“Wait, what?” she asked.

Jamie turned, still smiling.

“What?”

“Were you *serious* about taking Jimmy to a *club*?”

Jamie looked at her as if the question itself were strange.

“Yeah, why? What’s up?” Jamie asked.

Sasha just stared at him with a brow raised.

“Jamie, you *cannot* take Jimmy to a club,” she responded.

Jamie’s brows went up briefly before he frowned, confused.

“Why?” Jamie asked.

Sasha threw both hands outward in open disbelief.

“Because it’s *Jimmy*. *Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal*,” she said as she pointed toward her brother like he was Exhibit A in a trial only she understood. “That’s like taking a hyperactive child to Disneyland after pouring three bags of sugar into him and then handing him fireworks. He’ll go mad.”

Jimmy, meanwhile, had calmly resumed eating cereal, but now he had repositioned himself to sit on the arm of the sofa so he could watch both Sasha and Jamie with better visibility, like this was a sitcom that had improved after the commercial break. Jamie turned and looked at Jimmy, then back at Sasha.

“Sasha, get a grip,” Jamie said. “What could happen?”

Sasha stared at him with briefly widened eyes.

“Jamie,” she said slowly, “it’s *Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal.* Did you *not* see *28 Years Later: The Bone Temple*?”

Jamie frowned a little, one brow up.

“I thought you said he was changed.”

“Yeah, he has changed and is redeemed,” she said quickly, “in a lot of ways. But in a lot of other ways, he’s still *Jimmy*. He’s still high-energy, often *too* high-energy.”

She lowered her voice slightly, though not enough to stop Jimmy from hearing a word.

“And what if something goes wrong?” she asked. “What if somebody starts a fight with him? What if some girl starts smoozing up to him and tries to roofie him?”

Jimmy, with a mouthful of cereal, frowned at her, confused.

“What the fuck does roofie mean?” Jimmy asked.

Jamie had to turn his head away for a second because he was already laughing. Sasha cut him a sharp look and pointed at Jimmy with her whole hand.

“*See*? See what I mean?” Sasha said. “You can’t take that damn boy to no damn *club* all damn willy-nilly!”

“Willy-*nilly*? What in *shite* does that mean, Sasha?” Jimmy asked with a faint frown and a raised brow, once again confused.

Jamie shook his head, laughing lightly, then looked back at her.

“Look, Sasha, you *do* know that man is thirty-seven, right?” Jamie asked. “*Thirty-seven*, not seven.”

Sasha gave him a flat look.

“Yeah? Tell that to him.”

Jimmy, still perched on the sofa arm like some bizarre, elegant gremlin, frowned at them both.

“Hey,” Jimmy said. “I know how old I fuckin’ am. Don’t think just because I like Teletummies and The Power Rangers that I don’t know basic fuckin’ information.”

That made Sasha laugh, and even Jamie snickered at that one.

“See?” Jamie said while pointing at him. “He know. He grown.”

Sasha folded her arms.

“That doesn’t mean I want him out somewhere getting into a whole heap of trouble. He’s never even had alcohol before, so what if he drinks too much and gets sick or something?”

That did it. Jimmy let out this sudden spit-take laugh around the cereal milk he hadn’t quite swallowed yet, coughed once, then started laughing harder, the kind of cracked-up laughter that caught Jamie too. Jamie bent over a little, laughing hard while clapping. Sasha frowned between them.

“What’s funny?” she asked.

Jimmy looked at her with open amusement, bright-eyed and incredulous.

“I’ve never had *alcohol* before?” Jimmy repeated, laughing again. “Sasha, I have *absolutely* had alcohol before, and at times, *copious* fuckin’ amounts of it.”

Jimmy flashed her that signature Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal smile, then, all charm and bad behavior and bright-eyed arrogance.

“You keep lookin’ at me like I’m some innocent wee baby wolf,” Jimmy said, amused, “which I love by the way—don’t stop fuckin’ doing that—and, to be fair, I am adorable. But —Sasha, come on, I’m not *that* innocent.”

Jamie barked out a laugh. Jimmy gave a little shrug, still smiling.

“You forget the world I came from, sis,” Jimmy continued. “*28 Years Later: The Bone Temple* wasn’t exactly a fuckin’ church picnic. There was a lot of shite I did that they didn’t even put on camera with that Jack O’…what’s-his-face.”

Jamie laughed. Sasha just gaped at him. Jimmy’s smile turned even more playful.

“I wasn’t *always* redeemed and good, y’know,” Jimmy added.

Then he gave her a quick wink, laughed to himself, and turned back to eating his cereal like he hadn’t just casually detonated her entire image of him.

Sasha shook her head, a light laugh escaping her anyway.

“Whatever, Jimmy,” she said with a faint smile. “Look, I know you’re not that innocent, but —okay—”

She stopped and frowned, confused at him.

“Did you have this copious amounts of alcohol—*before* coming to Pelmont or after?” she asked.

Laughing hard, Jimmy hopped down off the arm of the sofa and shook his head.

“Shite, Sasha, you kill me, I swear,” Jimmy said with an amused smile.

Jimmy laughed again, a loose, delighted laugh, and walked past both of them toward the kitchen like he had to move physically or he’d laugh harder. Sasha turned slowly toward Jamie in disbelief.

“When?” she asked.

“Sash,” Jamie said, still smiling, amused.

“No, when?” she asked.

From the kitchen, Jimmy lightly laughed and then called out:

“In *life*, woman. I didn’t spend twenty-eight years drinkin’ milk and fuckin’ singin’ to the sun.”

That sent Jamie right back into laughter. Sasha put a hand to her forehead.

“Okay, I can’t deal with either of you.”

In the kitchen, Jimmy had set his cereal bowl down and was now fixing himself coffee like a man who had never just detonated an entire assumption about himself. He moved around the counter with total ease, still smiling to himself. Jamie followed Sasha into the kitchen doorway and lowered his voice just enough to make it feel like reason rather than a challenge.

“Sasha, you need to relax,” Jamie said with a faint smile.

“Yeah, that’s easy for you to say,” she replied with a shake of her head.

“No, for real,” Jamie said. “He gon’ be fine. He’s goin’ with me.”

Sasha looked at him with a brow raised.

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?” Sasha asked. “I know how you like to get turnt up at parties.”

Jamie laughed.

“Besides,” Sasha said, “it’s me who has to make sure Jimmy doesn’t get himself into dangerous situations.”

Jamie laughed softly.

“Yeah, but Jimmy’s not a child, Sasha.”

Jamie nodded once toward the kitchen and then laughed and shook his head as Jimmy’s eyes briefly widened and he almost loudly gasped as he accidentally spilled instant coffee grounds all over the counter of the island while trying to open the jar.

“Shite,” Jimmy said in a low voice before childishly laughing and going to get the dishcloth from the sink.

“Even if sometimes dude absolutely acts like one,” Jamie added with a faint, amused smile.

Sasha gave him a look that said exactly. Jamie spread his hands.

“But the proof is all the *adult* things he done before,” Jamie said.

Then he turned his head toward Jimmy, who was stirring coffee and looking altogether too pleased with himself, and Jamie’s whole grin went wide and wicked.

“Like last night,” Jamie said, voice full of showy, teasing heat, “I know Kellie had you up in there with birthday privileges all the way turned on, right?”

Jimmy glanced over his shoulder at him with a sly, mischievous smile that instantly answered the question before his mouth did. Then Jimmy leaned one hip against the counter, lifted his coffee mug, and said with lazy, profane satisfaction:

“Well, I mean…it *was* my birthday. I’d have expected at least *moderate* levels of devotion.”

Jamie barked out a laugh. Jimmy’s own laugh followed right after, bright and boyish and pleased with himself in the most shameless way. Sasha lightly laughed too, shaking her head as if she hated being surrounded by this much male nonsense before ten in the morning.

“Fucking hell,” she said with a faint smile.

Jimmy smiled into his coffee. Jamie looked back at Sasha.

“You see?” Jamie said with a faint smile. “He grown.”

Sasha sighed.

“I still have reservations.”

“*Why*?” Jamie asked.

“Because he has never been in that kind of environment before,” she said. “Not like that. Not a full nightclub. Not with random people, alcohol, women, chaos, all of it at once.”

She pointed toward Jimmy again.

“That is a lot of stimulation for one Sir Lord.”

Jimmy took a sip of coffee and then walked over to her, still smiling. When he reached her, he draped an arm around her shoulders in easy affection and gave her a warm, reassuring squeeze.

“Relax, sis,” Jimmy said. “I’ll be absolutely fine. I promise.”

Sasha looked up at him.

“If it were me, would you let me go?” she asked.

Jimmy didn’t even hesitate.

“Hell no, nope,” he responded with a faint smile, which made Jamie laugh.

“*Wow*, really?” Sasha blinked with a half-smile and a raised brow. “Talk about a damn double standard.”

“Yes, I’m serious,” Jimmy said, looking at her like the answer should have been obvious. “Absolutely the fuck not, if I have to lock you in your fuckin’ room, I will. ”

That made Jamie laugh under his breath. Jimmy kept his arm around her shoulders and lifted his coffee mug slightly with the other hand, warming into his own reasoning.

“Because see, unlike me, you’re *definitely*, *absolutely* fuckin’ innocent,” Jimmy said. “I know the kind of shite that can happen out there, and as your brother, I also know you’d need super protection from…a *lot* of shite.”

Sasha stared at him for a second, then laughed and playfully smacked him on the arm.

“Jimmy!” she exclaimed with a half smile.

Jimmy laughed too.

“What?” Jimmy said, smiling. “I’m right.”

Jamie was smiling now.

“He is right, though, Sash,” Jamie said with a smile, “you do sometimes got that—Synclaire from—Living Single type of shit going on with you—*sometimes*, but then other times, you be like Maxine, but not *all* the time though.”

Jamie and Jimmy laughed, but then Jimmy stopped laughing and raised a brow.

“Wait—who the hell is Maxine and Synclaire?’ Jimmy asked with a confused frown.

Jamie lightly laughed.

“I’ll tell you about it later, bruh, don’t worry about it,” Jamie said with a faint smile and a slight shake of his head.

“Anyway,” Jimmy said with a slight shake of his head, going back to his thoughts and speech while pointing at Sasha with his mug. “I mean it, Sash. You’re lovely, you’re kind when you want to be, you’ve got fuckin’ trustin energy, and that’s dangerous. You’d be out there bein’ all nice and polite while some dodgy fuckin’ bastard starts talkin’ nonsense, and then suddenly I’ve got to appear out of smoke and beat the shite out of him with a bar stool.”

That got a bigger laugh out of Sasha.

“Jimmy, you’re ridiculous,” she said with a faint smile.

“I’m *protective*,” Jimmy corrected with a slight tilt and nod of his head. “There’s a difference. Look, the worst thing that’ll happen if I go tonight is I’ll have to sit through Remmick doin’ some melancholy Irish fuckin’ croonin’ near the bar while everybody pretends it’s deeply fuckin’ romantic.”

Jamie cracked up laughing. From the kitchen arch, even the television in the living room seemed to keep humming along like it approved. Sasha closed her eyes briefly, sighed, rolled them when she opened them again, then looked from Jimmy to Jamie and back one last time.

“Fine,” she said at last. “All right.”

Jimmy’s reaction was immediate and almost hilariously childlike. He let out a giddy little laugh, dropped his arm from her shoulder, and bounced once in place.

“Ha! Beautiful! Howzat!”

Jamie clapped his hands together once, a big grin back in full force.

“That’s what I’m talkin’ about!” Jamie exclaimed while pointing at Jimmy. “A’ight, I’ll be back at eleven tonight to pick you up, man. We gon’ get you right. Good music, good people, little birthday-afterparty energy. It’s gon’ be a great night.”

Jimmy’s eyes lit up even more.

“Eleven,” Jimmy repeated, already visibly running ahead into the event in his mind. “Right. Fine. Excellent. What’s the dress code? How dangerous do I need to look? Is there a VIP area? Will there be properly cold drinks? Is there somewhere to sit if the music turns shite? What if I want to judge the room dramatically from a booth? Am I allowed to do that?”

Jamie laughed.

“Bruh, yeah. Judge the whole damn room if you want,” Jamie responded.

“Good, I probably will,” Jimmy said with a smile.

“I know,” Jamie said with a full smile after laughing.

Sasha stared at both of them like she was watching the opening stages of a highly preventable disaster. Jimmy, meanwhile, had that bright, curious, thrilled look on his face now, the one that meant he had already mentally arrived at the club, surveyed the lights, chosen a drink, insulted at least two strangers, and maybe started dancing badly but with majestic confidence. Sasha saw the look and shook her head with a faint smile.

“Damn, I think I’m going to need some Tylenol,” she said in a low voice.

Jimmy turned toward her with a smile. “This is gonna be brilliant.”

“Yeah, that’s exactly what I’m afraid of,” she said.

Jamie laughed and started backing toward the front of the house.

“Eleven o’clock,” Jamie said again, “be ready.”

“I was born ready, you magnificent bastard,” Jimmy said with a faint frown and a half smile as he lifted his coffee mug like a toast.

Jamie pointed at him, laughing.

“*See*?” Jamie said with a smile, “that right there! That’s why he comin’ with us tonight!”

Then Jamie was gone, still laughing as Sasha walked him to the door. A moment later, she came back into the living room and found Jimmy already sitting forward on the sofa again, cereal forgotten, coffee in hand, his eyes fixed on nothing as if he were staring straight into

the future and the future had bottle service. Sasha stood there for a moment with her arms folded.

“Jimmy, you’re not allowed to act insane tonight,” she said.

Jimmy looked up at her, all innocence.

“I never act insane,” he replied.

She gave him a brow-raising look. Jimmy sipped his coffee, then added:

“I act beautifully under pressure.”

That made her laugh despite herself. Then he smiled, turned back toward the television, and with all the eager, buzzing curiosity of a kid who’d just found out he was going somewhere he’d never been before, said, almost to himself:

“A nightclub.”

Sasha heard it, sighed again, and looked toward the ceiling like she was asking Pelmont itself for patience, but Jimmy was already smiling, and somewhere under Sasha’s reservations, under all her protective worry and practical dread, she knew exactly why. Because for all his chaos, all his drama, all his dangerous glittering energy, Jimmy was happy—and tonight, the universe help everybody at Club Juke, he was going out.

Scene Song: “Electric Relaxation ~ A Tribe Called Quest

Jamie pulled up to Remmick’s place right around sundown, when the light went all syrupy gold, and the porch looked dipped in old memory. Remmick was out on the swing, long legs stretched, banjo in his lap, fingers moving easily over the strings as if he had nowhere else in the world to be. Sammy stood off to the side, singing low and rough over the music, some blues number that sounded half like heartbreak, half like a warning. Pearline was leaning against the porch post with her arms folded, smiling to herself, and Delta Slim was sunk deep in a chair, nodding along as if the song belonged to him too. Jamie hit the gate and called out:

“What’s good, family?!” Jamie exclaimed with a smile.

Sammy cut his song short and smiled.

“Look who done slid through.”

Jamie came up the steps smiling, dapped Sammy first, then Delta Slim, gave Pearline a quick hug, and finally reached Remmick. Remmick looked up at him with that same unreadable

face of his, then stood to shake his hand. Jamie pulled him in anyway for a quick one-armed hug.

“Man, you always cool as ice,” Jamie said after laughing lightly and stepping back.

“And you’re always loud before you even reach the porch,” Remmick replied, settling back onto the swing with a half smile.

“I already know you comin’ to Club Juke tonight,” Jamie said, pointing at Sammy.

“Yup, you know I’m there,” Sammy replied with a smile.

Jamie looked over at Remmick.

“Question is, Rem, you tryna come through too?”

Remmick lifted one brow, that little half smile tugging at his mouth before he looked away and let out a soft laugh through his nose. He glanced back at Jamie.

“Jamie, you remember,” Remmick said, calm as ever, “what happened the last time I tried to get into Club Juke?”

Sammy barked out a laugh before Jamie could answer.

“Yeah. They ain’t let your creepy ass in,” Sammy said with a smile.

Pearline and Jamie laughed. Delta Slim laughed harder.

Remmick frowned at Sammy with just a sliver of disdain over Sammy’s comment before rolling his eyes and shaking his head with a brief, faint smile.

“Nah, nah,” Jamie said with a faint smile. “I remember. But tonight different. Ain’t nobody sneakin’ in, ain’t nobody gettin’ barred at the door. I’m invitin’ you for real this time, straight up.”

Remmick leaned back into the swing, banjo resting against his knee. His smile stayed there, small.

“Yeah,” Remmick said, “all right.”

Sammy sucked his teeth and gave Jamie a look.

“Man,” Jamie said, “you know damn well Remmick don’t know how to get down like we do at Club Juke.”

Delta Slim let out a dry laugh. Remmick frowned just a little at Sammy, though the corner of his mouth still twitched into a small smile.

“What? I know how to party,” Remmick said, smiling.

“Yeah, right, you?” Sammy asked with an amused smile as he folded his arms.

“Yeah,” Remmick replied, “I party, and I love to drink.”

Pearline laughed lightly.

“And,” Remmick went on, snapping his fingers twice, “I have been known to dance to an Irish jig or two.”

Then, still seated, Remmick did a tiny sharp, two-step head move with his finger snaps, something halfway between a dance and a private joke. It was so sudden and so oddly proud that Jamie burst out laughing. Delta Slim shook his head while laughing. Sammy laughed, and even Pearline had to turn away for a second, her hand over her mouth, trying to hold back a laugh. Remmick faintly frowned and then lightly laughed.

“What?” Remmick asked with a half smile.

“Yeah, nah, see?” Jamie said, “that right there? That is *exactly* why you need to come. But listen, it ain’t that type of party tonight, Rem. We poppin’ bottles, gettin’ turnt up to some whole different music.”

Remmick nodded slowly, still amused.

“All right. I’m still interested.”

Sammy leaned toward Delta Slim and Pearline, and with his voice low but not low enough, he said:

“Tonight finna be funny as hell.”

Pearline and Delta Slim laughed. Jamie smiled and rocked back on his heels.

“Jimmy coming too,” Jamie said, “and a couple other folks.”

At Jimmy’s name, Remmick’s eyes widened just a little. He looked off toward the yard and let out a sigh so tired it sounded practiced.

“No….never mind,” Remmick said, “I—I don’t feel like babysitting Jimmy tonight, so just forget it.”

Sammy and Delta Slim both cracked up at that. Jamie threw both hands up.

“Nah, ain’t gonna be no babysittin’ tonight,” Jamie said. “Everybody going to Club Juke as grown folks. Jimmy included.”

Remmick looked at him for a long second, still not fully convinced. Then he leaned back into the swing and nodded once.

“Fine,” Remmick said. “What time should I be ready?”

“Eleven,” Jamie said. “Be ready at eleven sharp.”

“Okay,” Remmick said, giving Jamie a small nod.

For a second, nobody said anything. The porch settled into one of those easy little silences, the kind that lived between people who knew each other well enough not to force words. And as Jamie walked off down the beach boardwalk, he could hear Remmick’s banjo carrying on, light and sly, like even the porch knew tonight was about to be a mess.

Scene Song: “Blame It” ~ Jamie Foxx

By eleven o’clock that night, Jimmy Crystal looked dangerously good. The whole house seemed to know it. The warm night air drifted in through the cracked kitchen window, carrying the soft hush of Pelmont after sunset, but inside Jimmy’s house, everything smelled faintly of fresh cologne, coffee from earlier, and the kind of anticipation that made a room feel charged before a night out. Jimmy came down the hall and into the kitchen like he was making an entrance for people who ought to have been standing and applauding. He’d dressed for the occasion with full Sir Lord intention. Black jeans, fitted just right. Crisp white trainers. A white shirt under the black varsity-style jacket Sasha had given him, the bold white **J** on the chest catching the light every time he moved. Around his neck hung his chains, including the new one, the glittering **J** pendant Sasha had gifted him, which sat against his chest as if it had always belonged there. His rings flashed on his fingers.

His tiara sat in place with exact, unreasonable dignity. His platinum blond hair was styled to perfection, every part of it deliberate. And the cologne he’d chosen from his birthday gifts gave off a dark, expensive smell that made him seem like the most charming man in the room. He stepped into the kitchen wearing that signature Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal smile, all swagger and mischief and bright-eyed certainty.

“Well,” he announced, “I hope Club Juke’s emotionally prepared, because I already know I’m about to have a fun as *fuck* time.”

Kellie laughed immediately from where she sat on one of the stools at the island. Sasha, standing by the counter with her arms folded, took one look at him and let out a slow breath through her nose that said two things at once: he looked incredible, and she was already worried. She pushed off the counter and walked toward him.

“Ground rules.”

Jimmy’s reaction was immediate. He rolled his eyes with a faint smile, then looked at her with a comically animated frown and half-smile, his hands spreading slightly.

“Yes, *MOM*, what are the ground rules?”

Kellie burst out laughing. Even Jimmy laughed a little at himself, shoulders loosening with it. Sasha raised one brow, but there was a small smile tugging at her mouth too.

“Very funny,” she said. “First of all, do not leave your drink alone for one minute. Not one. People can put things in it and drug you.”

Jimmy’s face twisted.

“That’s fuckin’ vile.”

“It happens,” Sasha said firmly.

Kellie nodded from the island.

“Yeah. Sasha’s right about that.”

Sasha pointed at him.

“See? Listen to your girlfriend.”

Jimmy glanced over at Kellie, then back at Sasha, with his mouth pulling to one side. Sasha continued, warming into her list now.

“And remember that you have a *girlfriend*.”

Kellie got up so fast off the stool that it made Jimmy blink. She came over and stood beside Sasha, fully joining the briefing like this had become official business.

“Yeah,” Kellie said, pointing at him. “That’s right. I don’t want to hear any stories about you hooking up with anybody else, Jimmy.”

She narrowed her eyes a little.

“Or me and Sasha will both be hunting down you *and* the bitch you hooked up with.”

Sasha laughed out loud at the bluntness of it. Jimmy looked away and laughed too, shaking his head once before looking back at Kellie with that faint frown, half-smile expression he got when he knew he was being bad on purpose.

“No promises,” he said lightly.

Kellie barked out a laugh and smacked his arm.

“*Jimmy*!”

He laughed harder.

“I’m joking, woman, shite.”

“Yeah, you better be,” Kellie replied with a faint smile.

“I mostly am,” he said with a faint smile.

Kellie hit his arm again, smiling now even while trying to look stern.

“I’m serious,” Kellie said.

Jimmy held both hands up with a half smile.

“All right, all right. I’ll be on my best behavior,” he said.

That was exactly when a car horn honked twice, loud and sharp, from outside. All three of them paused. Then Kellie looked toward the front of the house and said:

“That’s Jamie.”

“Of course it is,” Sasha muttered.

Kellie turned back to Jimmy and kissed him on the lips before folding her arms, amusement back on her face.

“What exactly is your best behavior?”

Jimmy was already moving toward the front door, but he slowed just enough to throw them both a look over his shoulder.

“My best behavior?” he repeated.

He opened the door, then stopped in the doorway and looked back at them with a wicked little smile.

“Remember when Ian played Iron Maiden at The Bone Temple,” he said, “and I was dancin’ all around wild with the other Jimmies like the music had personally chosen us?”

Sasha already knew where this was going and started laughing. Kellie laughed too. Jimmy nodded once.

“*That*,” he said, smiling, “is me on my best behavior tonight.”

That got a full laugh out of both women. Sasha shook her head.

“Yeah, that’s exactly what I’m afraid of,” Sasha said with a faint smile.

Jimmy laughed. Kellie crossed her arms tighter, still laughing.

“You’re *so* not helping your case right now, Jimmy,” Kellie said with a smile.

Jimmy smiled, swung the door open wider, and started backing out onto the porch while still facing Sasha and Kellie.

“Don’t wait up,” he said, flashing them that perfectly shameless Sir Lord smile.

Then he winked. Then he stepped backward onto the porch, reached one hand in, and pulled the door closed behind him with a smooth, casual little flourish like he was ending a scene in a film that knew exactly how good-looking its lead was.

The kitchen went quiet for half a second after he left. Then Kellie looked at Sasha. Sasha looked at Kellie, and both of them immediately moved toward the window. They reached it just in time to see Jimmy striding down the walk under the soft gold-and-blue Pelmont night, jacket sharp, chains catching porchlight, tiara glinting, every inch of him carrying that dangerous mixture of confidence and excitement that meant trouble was not only possible, but probably already dressing itself.

Out at the curb, Jamie leaned across the passenger side from the driver's seat and shoved the door open, music faintly thumping from inside the car. Jimmy pointed at the car with delighted approval as if it had arrived correctly. Then he got in. The door slammed. The car pulled off. Sasha stood there at the window with one hand on her hip. Kellie stood beside her, smiling despite herself. After a second, Sasha exhaled and said:

"This is going to be a mess," she said with a faint smile.

Kellie watched the taillights disappear down the street and laughed softly.

"Oh, absolutely. But just wait until our girls' night out with Annie, Mary, and Pearline next weekend," Kellie said, smiling at her.

Sasha looked at her and smiled back, and then both of them laughed before exchanging a playful handshake. Outside, the night was warm, the sky above Pelmont was deep and clear, and somewhere ahead of them, Club Juke was waiting, and rolling toward it now in a car full of swagger and bad decisions wrapped in birthday cologne, Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal was smiling like the night had already opened its arms for him.

Scene Song: "Stay Fly" ~ Three 6 Mafia

The Escalade rolled down Remmick's street slowly, glossy black under the wash of porch lights and streetlamps, music humming low through the speakers while laughter kept jumping around inside the truck. Jamie had one hand on the wheel, cool as ever, while Jimmy sat in the passenger seat, practically vibrating with excitement. In the rows behind them, Sammy, Bo, Stack, Skylar, and Kevin Hart were packed shoulder to shoulder, talking over each other, roasting each other, cutting up the whole ride. Then Jamie eased off the gas.

"There he go," Jamie said.

Everybody looked. Remmick was leaning against one of the front porch posts like the whole night had shown up for him instead of the other way around. He had on a fitted black button-down, open at the collar just enough to be disrespectful, sleeves rolled neat to the forearms, black slacks, a black belt, a dark watch catching a little glint from the porch light, and clean white sneakers that made the whole fit hit even harder. He looked sharp. Smooth. Too damn put together like he knew exactly what he was doing.

Jimmy let out a low, impressed breath.

“Well, shite,” Jimmy said with a half smile, “don’t you look sinful.”

Skylar turned and gave him a look while smiling and faintly frowning.

“You say weird shit with way too much confidence,” Skylar said.

“Nah, hold up,” Kevin said as he leaned forward between the seats. “Why this man dressed like he own a damn funeral home, a jazz bar, and three women’s hearts at the same damn time?”

That got a loud laugh out of the truck.

“I ain’t gonna lie, Remmick is clean as hell,” Sammy said.

“*Clean*?” Bo said with a faint smile. “Man looks expensive.”

Stack laughed and then nodded toward the porch.

“He look like he about to either steal somebody's girl or deny somebody a loan application,” Stack said with a smile.

Even Jamie laughed at that. Remmick, still leaning against the post, watched the truck with that same little unreadable half smile of his. He pushed off the porch post and came down the steps like he had all night in the world. Kevin rolled the window down more and called out:

“Bruh, get your ass in this truck! We been in here sweatin’ and survivin’ and you out there lookin’ like a whole damn R&B album cover!”

Remmick opened the back door, looked at the packed SUV, then at all the faces turned toward him.

“Well, shit,” Remmick said, smiling, “this look safe.”

Kevin slapped the seat.

“Safe? Man, get the hell in the car. Don’t stand out there actin’ like you too damn fine to ride with us.”

That got a laugh out of everybody — including Remmick, who let out a quiet one as he slid inside.

“Oh, I’m *definitely* too damn fine for this shit,” Remmick said, settling into the seat, “but I came anyway.”

“All right, Remmick,” Sammy said with a smile, “I want to see the *real* Remmick tonight, not that—mysterious vampire lawyer shit.”

“Damn, you say that like it doesn’t get results,” Remmick said before briefly frowning with a smile.

Sammy, Jimmy, and Bo Jamie laughed. Jimmy was still half turned around in his seat and was smiling too hard.

“Shite, I knew this was a good idea,” Jimmy said. “I could fuckin’ *feel* it.”

“Jimmy, you always ‘feel’ some bullshit,” Skylar said with a smile before looking out the window.

“No, I’m serious,” Jimmy said, “tonight is going to be fuckin’ amazing. The drinks, the music, the atmosphere—”

Kevin cut in:

“Bruh, why you sound like a bisexual event flyer or some shit right now?”

The Escalade shook with laughter.

“And you sound like a fuckin’ fun-size emergency, Kevin,” Jimmy said with a faint frown and an amused half smile.

The Escalade lit up in laughter, with even Jamie slapping the wheel laughing, and even Remmick dropping his head with a smile.

“Aww, so we doin’ short jokes now?” Kevin said, smiling. “A’ight, cool. Keep talkin’, blondie. Your next drink finna come in a damn juice box.”

Jimmy and everyone else laughed. Remmick leaned back, smiling now, more at ease.

“No, Jimmy’s right,” Remmick said. “This was worth coming for.”

“See? Told you,” Jamie said with a smile as he pointed in the rearview.

Sammy leaned over a little to Remmick.

“So what’s your plan tonight, Rem? You gon’ actually get loose, or you gon’ just stand in a dark corner with a drink lookin’ expensive?”

Remmick thought about it for a second and then shrugged.

“I don’t, a bit of both, probably,” he responded.

“Nah, see,” Kevin said while pointing at Remick, “that’s exactly the type of answer that gets people in trouble. ‘Bit of both’ mean he gon’ be chill all night, then say one slick-ass sentence at 1:12 and have three people ready to fight and two fucking people ready to risk it all.”

Everyone laughed.

Chapter 2

Scene Song: "Just Be Good To Me" ~ SOS Band

Club Juke was alive before they even got through the doors. The big converted timber hall glowed against the Pelmont night like it had been built out of heat, music, and bad intentions. Outside, the neon CLUB JUKE sign burned red above the roof, its reflection bleeding long and bright across the dark water nearby like the whole building had set the edge of the world on fire.

Strings of warm porch lights wrapped the front in gold. Cars lined the lot. People moved in loose laughing groups across the gravel and walkway, stepping out into the summer-in-December night dressed in silk, leather, denim, gold, perfume, cologne, and confidence. Jamie pulled the Escalade in, killed the engine, and for one second, everybody inside just sat there listening. The bass, the pulse of it, the deep, booming throb of "Just Be Good To Me" by The S.O.S. Band rolling out through the walls and into the night, rich and glossy and thick with promise. You could feel it before you fully heard it, a slow heartbeat under everything. Jimmy's eyes were already wide. Kevin saw his face and shook his head.

“Nope,” Kevin said. “Nope. That right there? That’s too much damn excitement for one grown-ass man.”

Jimmy ignored him completely and got out of the SUV like the building had personally invited him by name. The second his white trainers hit the ground, he looked up at the glowing sign, the warm-lit porch, the movement at the doors, and then beyond that, when the doors opened for a couple walking out and a burst of music and colored light spilled across the entrance, Jimmy let out a long, loud whistle.

“Whoo-hoo, look at this place!” Jimmy exclaimed.

Jimmy sounded exactly like an energetic child who had just been brought somewhere enormous and magical. Remmick stepped out behind him, heard that whistle, looked away with a laugh, and muttered to Skylar:

“Shit, here we go.”

Skylar laughed under his breath.

“Exactly.”

Jimmy was already walking toward the entrance ahead of them, hands half-spread, head turning every which way, taking in everything. The varsity jacket Sasha had given him sat sharp and clean over his white shirt, the big J bright against the black. His chains flashed every time the porch lights hit them, especially the new J pendant at his chest. The tiara glinted. His hair was perfect. His whole face was lit with raw, stupidly open excitement. Kevin came up beside Jamie and watched Jimmy go with his hands on his hips.

“Man look like a damn Make-A-Wish came true,” Kevin said as Jamie laughed.

Jamie barked out a laugh. Inside, Club Juke hit them all at once.

The place was enormous, not polished in a sleek modern way. Better than that. Rich dark wood rose everywhere, barn-high ceilings with exposed beams and great circular chandeliers burning gold overhead, making the whole room feel half Southern cathedral, half dancehall dream.

Along one end stretched a massive backlit bar lined with bottles that shone like treasure under amber shelving. The polished dark floor reflected the colored flood lights sweeping across the room from the stage. At the far side sat the raised platform under changing pink, blue, purple, and gold lights, speakers stacked big and black on either side, the music rolling through them clean and heavy.

The place was already packed with people everywhere. People were at the bar, shoulder to shoulder. Couples moving on the dance floor. Women in shining dresses and jumpsuits. Men in chains, boots, button-downs, fitted tees, hats tilted just right. Laughter. Glasses clinking. Perfume and wood polish and sweat and expensive liquor and loud bass all mixed into one feverishly good smell. Jimmy stopped just inside the entrance and took it all in, then he whistled again.

“Fuckin’ hell,” Jimmy said under his breath, saying it with pure awe.

The colorful flood lights rolled over his face. The music hit his chest. The crowd moved like one giant living thing around him, and Jimmy stood right in the middle of it looking thrilled enough to levitate. Jamie clapped a hand on his shoulder and steered him forward before he could get trampled by the nightlife he was busy admiring.

“Come on, man. Don’t stand in the damn doorway fallin’ in love,” Jamie said with a smile.

Jimmy laughed.

“I’m not falling in love,” Jimmy said with a faint smile, though his eyes stayed huge as they swept the room. “I’m bein’ appropriately fuckin’ dazzled.”

Kevin laughed hard.

“He dazzled, y’all. He said, dazzled,” Kevin said before laughing again with Remmick and Stack laughing with him.

They made their way deeper in, cutting through the crowd toward one of the long wraparound booths along the side wall, a wide, dark leather setup tucked close enough to the dance floor to see everything and close enough to the bar to be dangerous. It took a minute to get there because Jimmy kept glancing everywhere at once, watching the lights, the dancers, the bartenders throwing bottles and reaching for glassware, the stage, the chandeliers, the whole thing.

“Keep moving,” Skylar muttered with a faint smile.

“I’m moving,” Jimmy replied.

Skylar laughed.

“You’re sightseeing,” Skylar said with an amused smile.

“I contain both abilities,” Jimmy replied with a faint frown and a half smile.

That got a laugh from Stack. By the time they slid into the booth, Jimmy sat with the restless, vibrating excitement of a man trying not to stand up every thirty seconds just because the room existed. Jamie took the outside edge closest to the aisle, Kevin near him, then Stack, Sammy, Bo, Skylar, Jimmy, and Remmick, who settled in with more calm than the others but was still visibly taking the place in. Not thirty seconds later, Smoke came over.

“Had to come see for myself if y’all was really in here bringin’ this much noise,” Smoke joked with a small, faint, and brief half smile.

Sammy stood and got his hug. Bo followed. Stack clasped Smoke by the hand. Kevin popped up next, smiling.

“Look at you, man!” Kevin exclaimed. “This place nice as hell!”

“Appreciate it,” Smoke replied after laughing.

Then his eyes landed on Jimmy. Jimmy stood with a bright, almost princely smile and opened his arms.

“Smoke,” Jimmy said warmly. “You magnificent bastard.”

Smoke shook his head, laughing as he hugged him anyway.

“You still extra,” Smoke said with a faint and brief smile.

Jimmy laughed.

“I prefer memorable,” Jimmy responded, smiling.

“Yeah, yeah,” Smoke said with a light and brief laugh.

Then Smoke’s gaze shifted to Remmick, and there was the smallest pause, not ugly, not tense, just real. Remmick stood up slowly, one hand already coming out for a shake. There was a cautiousness to him, faint but there. He remembered. The first time. The door. The violence. The bad blood in the air. Smoke looked at him for one beat longer, then took his hand firmly and pulled him into a hug too.

“Man,” Smoke said, clapping him once on the back, “look at you. You look good tonight. Glad you came.”

That genuinely caught Remmick off guard. It showed in the quick blink and the surprised half-smile that followed.

“Thanks,” Remmick said. “It’s nice to finally be here without all the violence and bullshit this time.”

Smoke let out a short laugh and patted his back again.

“Yeah. I’d say that’s an improvement.”

That got a smile out of Remmick.

“It is, yeah,” Remmick said with a brief, faint smile.

Smoke pulled back and looked around the table, and then nodded toward the bar.

“What y’all drinking?” Smoke asked.

Jamie didn't even look at the menu.

"Start with Don Julio 1942," Jamie said.

"And bring me that Hennessy Paradis too, neat. I'm not up in here to pretend," Kevin said as Jamie laughed.

"Macallan 18 for me," Stack said, leaning in.

"He trying to impress furniture, Sammy said with an amused smile.

"Boy, shut up," Stack said before lightly laughing with Sammy.

Bo asked for Rémy Martin Louis XIII, like he'd said it before and meant it. Skylar went with Clase Azul Reposado. Remmick asked for Redbreast 21, neat. Jimmy, who had clearly been waiting his whole life to do this, looked at Smoke and with rich seriousness said:

"I want whatever is top-shelf, cold if it should be cold, dangerous if it should be dangerous, and none of that watery bastard nonsense."

Smoke stared at him for one second, then he laughed.

"I'll see what I can do," Smoke said with a faint smile.

Kevin pointed across the table.

"Smoke, don't bring that man nothin' with fire," Kevin said with a half smile. "He already dressed like a bad damn decision."

That got a round of laughter from the table and a grin out of Smoke before he headed back toward the bar, but he stopped halfway and walked back over to them.

"Oh, and Jamie," Smoke said, "don't let Kevin start no foolishness."

Kevin looked offended.

"Hold up, *why* everybody keep puttin' chaos on me?"

"Because you're the only one with a body small enough to hold chaos," Jimmy joked with an amused smile.

Everybody laughed, and Kevin playfully flipped Jimmy the bird.

Smoke pointed toward them, already backing away.

"Enjoy yourselves. And Jimmy—"

Jimmy looked at Smoke with a brow raised

"Yeah?"

“Don’t climb on my furniture,” Smoke joked.

Jimmy laughed before holding his hands up briefly.

“I make no promises,” Jimmy joked with a smile.

Smoke laughed again and disappeared back into the crowd. For a second, Remmick watched him go, then sat back down, still a little amused.

“Well,” Remmick said, “that went better than expected.”

Jamie nudged his glassless hand against Remmick’s shoulder.

“Told you. Different tonight,” Jamie responded.

The music kept pouring over everything. Lights swept the dance floor. People kept moving. Jimmy sat forward, forearms on the table now, eyes still darting everywhere, drinking the whole room in like it was the first nightclub he had ever been to because, in this version of him, it was. Jamie caught him looking.

“You aight?” Jamie asked.

Jimmy looked at him with a smile that was all joy.

“This place is fuckin’ brilliant,” Jimmy said.

Kevin leaned back and shook his head.

“Jimmy, you still too excited,” Kevin said. “You at a level people usually hit after two damn drinks.”

Jimmy laughed.

“I don’t need two drinks,” Jimmy said. “I’ve got *natural* electricity.”

That got another laugh. When the drinks came, they came correctly. Crystal tumblers. Heavy pours. Amber, gold, and dark honey colors catching the club lights. Don Julio 1942 in tall, elegant bottles. Hennessy Paradis like liquid silk in a glass, Macallan 18, rich and smoky. Clase Azul poured smoothly and expensively. Redbreast 21, glowing copper in Remmick’s hand. Jimmy got an icy, top-shelf tequila cocktail built with Don Julio 1942 and Grand Marnier, finished with a clean, cold bite that made him shut one eye after the first sip and then grin like he had discovered religion.

“Ohhh, that is fuckin’ evil,” Jimmy said before smiling.

Jamie laughed.

“Good evil?” Jamie asked.

“*Excellent* fuckin’ evil,” Jimmy said with a faint frown and a half smile.

Jamie laughed lightly.

Kevin took his own sip and let out a low sound of approval.

“Yeah, now this is liquor that know how much it fucking cost,” Kevin said with a smile as Jamie and Bo lightly laughed.

For a little while, they settled into it. The men were talking like men do when the room is loud enough to loosen them up. Not fake PG-13 small talk. Real talk. Jokes, old stories, women, bad decisions narrowly avoided, worse ones proudly survived, clothes, music, who could fight, who only talked like they could fight, who danced, who lied about dancing, who had ever gotten too drunk and embarrassed themselves in public. The table loosened after that. The talk got rougher, funnier, and more real. Not a polite conversation. Grown-man conversation. Talking money, bad decisions, women that doubled back when they should’ve stayed gone, homeboys that couldn’t hold liquor, the difference between pretty and dangerous, whether or not any man over thirty-five still had the knees for a proper night out, who in the club looked like they came to dance and who came strictly to be seen. Jimmy, two or three sips in, was in rare form.

“I’m telling you now,” Jimmy said, leaning back with one arm across the booth, “I refuse to leave this fuckin’ place early. If I go home before the night’s had a chance to fully fuckin’ disgrace me, then what was the point of dressing?”

Kevin stared at him with an amused smile.

“Man, you talk like a rich fucking auntie with priors,” Kevin said before sharing a laugh with Remmick, Jamie, and Sammy.

The booth cracked up; even Remmick laughed.

Jimmy pointed at Kevin with his drink, smiling.

“And you,” Jimmy said, “continue to speak with the confidence of a man built like a fuckin’ argument.”

Kevin slapped the table as Jimmy and some of the others laughed.

“See? See?” Kevin said with a smile, “here this blond motherfucker go.”

“Fun-size emergency,” Skylar muttered into his glass before laughing.

That sent Kevin into a fresh fit of light laughter.

“Nah, not from you too,” Kevin said with a smile before laughing.

Then the music shifted. The slick old groove gave way to the unmistakable opening bounce of “Love Like This” by Faith Evans featuring Fat Man Scoop, and the whole club reacted at once. A cheer went up near the dance floor. Women started moving before the beat even fully settled in. Heads bobbed. Hips rolled. The room got looser in a heartbeat.

“Okay,” Jamie said, sitting forward with a smile. “Now they really trying to get shit going with this.”

“Hell yeah, that’s my shit right there,” Kevin added with a smile.

Stack, who had been scanning the floor anyway, suddenly cut his eyes toward the center and smirked.

“Oh, Jimmy,” Stack said.

Jimmy looked up from his drink.

“What?”

Stack tipped his chin toward the dance floor.

“About two o’clock, look,”

Jimmy turned. A woman in a fitted brown jumpsuit stood out near the edge of the crowd, dancing with her friend, looking straight at him. Pretty as hell. Sexy in that dangerous, self-aware way. Hair down. Body right. Smile like she already knew exactly what effect she was having. The lights kept catching on her as she moved.

Jimmy’s eyes widened immediately, and for one brief, hilarious second, his expression went completely boyish, almost startled in a pure dumbstruck wow.

“*Shite*,” Jimmy said with a boyish, excited smile.

Kevin saw his face and nearly dropped his drink laughing.

“Damn, look at him!” Kevin exclaimed, “look at his damn face!”

Jamie leaned forward and laughed.

“Dude look like somebody showed him fucking fireworks for the first time,” Jamie said, resulting in Kevin, Remmick, Stack, and Sammy laughing.

Then, just as quickly, Jimmy shifted, the wide-eyed wonder clicked down, and the thirty-seven-year-old ego slid back into place. Jimmy straightened, turned a little more toward her, and gave her that signature Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal smile, the one built out of charisma, bravado, vanity, and the deep private belief that if a woman was already looking at him, the universe had simply chosen correctly.

Stack softly laughed.

“Oh, there he go,” Stack said with a smile as Sammy laughed.

Bo shook his head, smiling. Jimmy didn’t even look back at them.

“She’s starin’,” Jimmy said, but he said it as though he were generously reporting the weather.

Jamie took a sip and smiled.

“Nah, man, she hunting,” Jamie said with a smile.

Jimmy laughed and then smiled again. Not ten seconds later, the woman broke from her friend and started walking over. That made the whole table come alive.

“Ohhh, shit,” Kevin said with hilarious briefly widened eyes.

“Here she come,” Sammy said with a faint smile.

“All right now, Jim, don’t embarrass the booth,” Stack said before lightly laughing.

Jimmy actually looked back at them with his brows lifted and a grin that clearly said, *Can you believe this shite?* Even while he was loving every second of it. Then she reached the table, stopped beside him, and smiled.

“Hi, you’re real cute,” she said.

Jimmy looked up at her slowly, like he had all the time in the world. Then he let that smile deepen and said:

“Aye, I’ve been accused of that before, usually by people with excellent taste.”

That made not only her laugh, but Jamie, Kevin, and Stack as well, at a lower volume behind him.

“Damn, bruh don’t waste time,” Kevin muttered with a faint smile.

The woman tipped her head.

“You wanna dance?” she asked.

Jimmy looked back at the table again, brows still up, the grin now fully saying, *She asked me. She actually asked me.* Stack was biting down on his smile, then Jimmy turned back to her and rose to his feet with easy swagger.

“Yeah,” Jimmy said. “I think I can spare the room a moment of my attention.”

She laughed again, took his hand, and Jimmy let her lead him out toward the dance floor, though the way he straightened his jacket on the way made it look like he was still somehow leading the event. The table lost it the second he was gone.

“Oh, he gone,” Jamie said with a laugh.

“Man ain’t even know what his feet about to do,” Stack said with a smile, causing Sammy and Kevin to laugh.

“Yeah, he can’t dance,” Sammy said before smiling with a shake of his head.

“Not to this,” Bo added, smiling.

“Hell no,” Stack said. “That boy finna get out there and embarrass all of us at this damn table.”

Kevin leaned over the booth, already laughing.

“He about to hit her with some Scottish-ass shoulder shuffle and get his ass sent back over here,” Kevin said.

Even Jamie was smiling hard.

“Nah, let him cook,” Jamie said, “Let him at least try first.”

But then Jimmy got there, and to everybody’s surprise, he didn’t die. At first, there was the tiniest awkward beat, just a few seconds where he took in the rhythm and the pace and the way she was moving in front of him, his shoulders still a little too formal, his hands not quite sure whether they belonged. Kevin saw that and slapped the table once while laughing—but then Jimmy *caught* it. Something in him loosened.

Jimmy stopped thinking about dancing and let the music take his body instead. His shoulders dropped into the groove first, then his hips, then his feet started moving with the beat instead of chasing it. He matched her pace, then her rhythm, then started adding his own to it, smooth rather than wild, precise without looking stiff, body rolling in time with the song as he stepped with her, turned with her, gave her space, drew closer, then moved again. And once he found it, he found it completely. There was style in it, unexpected style. His hands came up just enough.

His torso moved with the beat. His footwork stopped being uncertain and became clean, controlled, and fluid. He wasn’t throwing himself around like a clown trying to win the room. He was actually dancing, fitting himself to the music with real rhythm, real confidence, and enough flair that people nearby started to notice. The men in the booth stared. Remmick’s brows actually rose. Sammy stopped mid-sip. Bo blinked once. Stack sat all the way forward. And Kevin Hart, in a high-pitched burst of disbelief so loud it cut through the table’s laughter, shouted:

“GODDAMN!”

Jamie almost spat his drink out laughing. Kevin was still pointing.
“No, no, no, hold up. *Hold up*!” Kevin exclaimed with a smile. “*Why* the hell can he dance? *Why* the hell can he dance like that?”

Skylar had a hand over his face now, laughing.

“Yeah, that shit insane, I can’t believe it,” Stack said with a smile.

Sammy looked wounded but then laughed with a shake of his head.

“He been hidin’ this,” Sammy said, smiling.

Remmick stared another second, then shook his head once and laughed low into his glass.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Remmick said in a low voice.

Out on the floor, Jimmy had no idea the booth had turned into a witness stand, or maybe he *did*, maybe that made him better. Because once he realized he had the rhythm, the ego came back and polished the whole thing. He smiled at her, spun her lightly, caught her back in, stayed with the beat, not overdoing it, not underdoing it, moving like a man who had just discovered he was unexpectedly good at something and intended to make that everybody else’s problem. By the time the song was coming to an end, the booth was still in open shock. Jamie laughed.

“Man up there clean with it!” Jamie said with a smile.

“He *too* clean with it!” Stack exclaimed.

Jimmy and the woman slowed with the last of the song, both smiling now, she obviously impressed, he very obviously impressed with himself. He started to walk back toward the booth, chest a little lifted, face carrying that dangerous, smug shine of a man ready to collect praise. Then she caught his arm. Jimmy turned back, and before he could even shift into another line or smile, she yanked him in and kissed him hard, not a little peck, not some teasing brush, a real deep, serious, steamy kiss right there on the edge of the dance floor. Back at the booth, Kevin let out a scream-laugh. Jamie doubled over with laughter.

Stack and Sammy shouted at the same time. Bo laughed so hard he had to lean back and clap once. Even Remmick laughed. Jimmy’s first reaction was pure surprise, his brow pulling down against the kiss for half a second like his brain had stalled. But then the surprise melted, and the man in him took over, and he melted right into it.

His arms came around her, and he kissed her back with matched depth, forgetting every damn person watching, and just when it looked like he might disappear into the moment, she broke away first, smiling. Jimmy looked dazed in the best possible way. Then she winked and slipped her phone number into the front pocket of his jeans like she’d done it a thousand times before.

And then she was gone, turning away with a smile and disappearing back over to a corner booth where some other females sat. Jimmy stood there for one second in total disbelief, then he looked back toward the booth and laughed, not his cool laugh, not his cutting laugh, not his swagger laugh. No, as he brought his ringed knuckles up to his mouth, he let out a giddy, delighted, almost childish laugh, like some overgrown schoolboy who had just gotten kissed for the first time and could not believe the universe had behaved this generously. By the time he made it back to the booth, the table was in shambles with laughter. Jimmy slid back into the booth, smiling.

“Well,” Jimmy said with a faint frown and a half-smile, adjusting his jacket as if he hadn’t just been spiritually clotheslined by luck, “that escalated beautifully.”

The booth exploded again. Kevin pointed at him, breathless.

“No, no, no. Wai—wait a *minute*!” Kevin exclaimed with a smile, prompting Sammy, Jamie, and Bo to laugh. “I *need* a damn minute! She walked up, *called* you cute, *dragged* you out there, *found* out you could actually move, then *kissed* you like she was reclaiming property!”

Jimmy laughed harder.

“What can I say? I was ambushed by passion,” Jimmy said with a smile before taking a sip of his drink.

Stack leaned across the table, eyes wide.

“And where the fuck did that dancing come from?” Stack asked with a smile.

Jimmy looked at him with offended dignity before lightly laughing.

“I’ve got range,” Jimmy replied.

Sammy shook his head, smiling.

“You been sitting up in Sasha’s house every morning, watchin’ Teletubbies and Power Rangers like a little kid, meanwhile you got whole club footwork,” Sammy said before laughing.

“I’m a layered bastard,” Jimmy said before taking a slow drink and smiling over the rim of the glass.

“Man, she put her number in your pocket like she was making a deposit,” Jamie said, still smiling.

That got them all again. Jimmy reached into the front of his jeans, pulled the folded slip of paper free, and looked at it for a second with that same bright, disbelieving grin still on his face, like he couldn’t quite believe the night had handed him this on a silver platter. Then, to everybody’s surprise, he crumpled the paper up in one fist and tossed it into the little makeshift trash can nailed beneath the edge of the table. The booth went still for half a beat.

“What the hell?” Stack said with a single blink and a faint frown.

“You just threw it away?” Sammy asked, frowning too before lightly laughing.

Kevin leaned forward.

“Yeah, hold on,” Kevin asked. “Why you do that?”

Jimmy sat back with his drink in hand, looking entirely too pleased with himself.

“Because,” Jimmy said, full Sir Lord calm and swagger, “I’m keepin’ a promise to both Kellie and Sasha.”

That got a different kind of look from the table. Jimmy lifted one shoulder.

“No matter how fuckin’ delicious a woman looks,” Jimmy continued, “Kellie’s the only one who makes me…”

Jimmy stopped there, a mischievous smile spread slowly across his face, then he shook his head.

“No,” Jimmy said with a faint frown and a half smile. “I’m tellin’ you lot too fuckin’ much now.”

The whole booth laughed. Remmick nodded before taking a sip of his drink.

“That’s right, stay loyal, Jimmy,” Remmick said with a smile.

“I have moments of excellence,” Jimmy said before raising his glass slightly and smiling.

Chapter 3

Scene Song: "Didn't Cha Know" ~ Erykah Badu

About an hour later, the inside of Club Juke was still roaring. The walls throbbed with bass. Light spilled in broken flashes every time the door opened, pink and blue and gold cutting across the porch and gravel in quick pulses before disappearing again. Laughter drifted out in bursts. So did the chorus of whatever song had the floor moving now, the sound thick and distant outside, like the club had become its own breathing thing behind the walls. Out front, though, the night had softened. The air was warm and easy, still carrying that impossible Pelmont summer even though it was well past dark. The water beyond the road reflected the red neon of the **CLUB JUKE** sign in long, trembling streaks. Somewhere in the trees, there was the hush of leaves moving. The bench near the side of the building sat half in shadow, half in the wash of the porch lights. Jimmy was sitting there alone.

He had one elbow propped against the back of the bench, his legs stretched out, one ankle crossed over the other. His drink was still in his hand, barely touched in the last little while. His jacket was still sharp, his chains still catching the light when he moved, his tiara still on, though sitting a little more relaxed now as if even it had started to settle. His hair was somehow still perfect.

His face, though, had gone quieter, not sad, not bad, just quieter. The club was still booming behind him, but Jimmy looked like a man who had spent the first hour of a night running on pure electricity and had finally hit that point where the voltage turned soft around the edges. The door opened again, and Stack stepped out. He saw Jimmy on the bench, smiled instantly, and came over with his hands in his pockets.

"There your ass is," Stack said. "Everybody been wonderin' where you went."

Jimmy looked over, then laughed lightly and took a small sip from his drink.

"After an hour in there, I needed fresh air," Jimmy said. "I'm startin' to wind down."

Stack stopped in front of the bench and raised his brows.

"*You*?"

Jimmy looked up at him with a faint frown and half-smile.

"Yeah, me," Jimmy responded, nodding.

Stack laughed under his breath and sat beside him.

"Man, I thought you stayed energized all the time."

Jimmy laughed.

“Just because I’m a Sagittarius doesn’t mean I stay electric around the clock.”

That got a real laugh out of Stack.

“A Sagittarius,” Stack repeated.

“Aye,” Jimmy replied with a smile.

“You one of them zodiac people now?”

Jimmy made a frowning face that wasn’t meant to be serious.

“I’m not one of *them* anything. I’m simply aware of the fuckin’ obvious. Grand fire-sign energy. Natural magnetism. A temperament unsuited for boredom and weak company.”

Stack shook his head, laughing.

“Man, you make every damn thing sound like a warning label.”

Jimmy smiled into his glass.

“Because usually it is,” Jimmy replied.

For a while, they just sat there, the noise from inside filling the spaces between their words. Every now and then, the door opened, and a gust of music rolled out stronger, then dulled again when it shut. People came and went in clumps, laughing, smoking, checking phones, calling out to somebody still inside. But Jimmy and Stack stayed planted on the bench as if they had slipped into some smaller pocket of the night, something easier than the crowd and louder than silence but quieter than the club. Another hour passed that way, not all at once, but in drifts, a little talk here, a pause there, a sip, a laugh, a story. Then Stack sighed through his nose and rubbed a hand over his jaw.

“Mary on me about marriage again.”

Jimmy turned his head slowly with a sour frown.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Jimmy said.

Stack laughed.

“I know, right? But yeah, I’m serious though.”

Jimmy stared out at the night for a second, then tipped his glass in a little circle like he was contemplating a difficult spiritual matter.

“I’d rather fuckin’ die again than get tied down,” Jimmy said.

That made Stack bark out a laugh. Jimmy went on, warming to the thought.

“I’ve already been fuckin’ tied down to a crucifix down at Ian’s Bone Temple. So, I don’t fuckin’ intend to go through any type of tyin’ down shite again.”

That one hit hard enough that Stack doubled over laughing for a second, one hand on his stomach.

“Oh, man, that’s terrible,” Stack said with a smile.

Jimmy laughed.

“It’s also true,” Jimmy said, smiling.

Stack was still laughing. Jimmy took another sip, then faintly frowned with a half smile.

“You know what marriage sounds like to me?” Jimmy said.

“What?”

“Administrative fuckin’ romance.”

Stack let out another loud laugh.

“Administrative romance is crazy.”

Jimmy shrugged.

“I’m just sayin’. Forms. Expectations. Emotional invoices. No fuckin’ thank you.”

Stack laughed.

“You ain’t right.”

“I’m often right,” Jimmy corrected with a half smile.

Stack chuckled and shook his head, then looked out toward the water again.

“She do want it, though,” Stack said seriously.

Jimmy noticed the way he said that, not jokingly, not dismissing it, just plain. Jimmy looked down into his glass with a faint frown as he felt his thirty-seven-year-old self take hold.

“You’ll know when the time is right,” Jimmy said in almost a low voice, “and when it’s right for you, it’ll come right when she wants it too.”

Stack looked at Jimmy with raised brows and a smile.

“Look at you giving adult ass advice,” Stack joked.

Jimmy laughed before taking a big sip of his alcohol.

“Yeah, well, Kellie and Sasha have been making me watch fuckin’ soaps with them on the days they're off from work, so….” Jimmy said, prompting Stack to laugh, and Jimmy, seconds later, joined in the laughter.

“You’re right though. Thanks for the advice, Jimmy, really,” Stack said with a faint smile.

Jimmy nodded, half smiling. The laughter faded a notch after that, settling into something easier and more honest. Jimmy leaned forward then, resting his elbows on his knees, glass hanging loose from one hand. He looked down at the drink for a second, turning it slowly, watching the light move through it. When Jimmy spoke next, his voice had gone lower.

“Besides Remmick,” he said, “you’re probably my favorite friend to go to.”

That made Stack turn and look at him properly. Jimmy kept his eyes on the glass a second longer before looking over too, expression serious enough now that the line landed differently. Stack gave him a faint frown and a half-smile, like he was trying to decide whether this was nonsense or not.

“Man, stop playin’.”

Jimmy looked almost offended.

“I’m not playin’.”

Stack studied him. Jimmy leaned back a little and gave a small shrug.

“You remind me of myself,” Jimmy said. “You don’t take life too fuckin’ seriously. You’re funny. You know how to joke. You know how to have a good time. You’ve got a big ego, which I deeply respect.” He paused. “And I don’t know. I just…I like cuttin’ up with you.”

Stack’s face changed a little at that, not huge, just enough. Jimmy kept going because once he had started, he was not about to leave it half-said.

“You’re my best friend,” Jimmy said. “After Sasha. And after Remmick, you’re the one I’d probably most enjoy sittin’ around talkin’ shite with.”

That made Stack laugh softly, but the laugh had real feeling under it. He looked down once, then back at Jimmy, his eyes warmer now.

“Damn.”

Jimmy took a sip and tried to look less exposed than he probably felt.

“Yeah, all right, don’t make it fuckin’ weird,” Jimmy said with a smile.

Stack laughed again and nodded.

“Nah,” Stack said. “I feel the same way.”

Jimmy glanced at him. Stack shrugged.

“You funny as hell,” Stack continued. “You wild. You say whatever come to your mind, even when it probably shouldn’t.” He smirked. “Mostly when it shouldn’t. And yeah, I could cut up with you and laugh with you for a long-ass time.”

Jimmy smiled at that. Then Stack lifted one finger.

“Now, that don’t mean you up there with Smoke.”

Jimmy laughed immediately.

“Fair.”

“Ain’t *nobody* up there with Smoke in my eyes,” Stack said.

Jimmy nodded, smiling.

“Aye. I get that.”

Jimmy looked back out toward the water and the red glow shaking across it.

“I’m the same way about Sasha,” Jimmy said. “*Absolutely no* one is up there with her, not in my mind.”

Stack laughed.

“I know.”

Jimmy smiled into his drink.

“She’s my person,” Jimmy added.

“Yeah,” Stack said with a faint smile.

They sat with that truth for a second. It didn’t need fixing or decorating. It just sat there between them, clean and real. Then Stack looked back over at him.

“But after Smoke?” Stack said. “Yeah. You number two. Easy.”

Jimmy turned his head, brows lifting.

“Easy?”

“Easy,” Stack repeated.

“Bold statement,” Jimmy said with a faint frown and a half smile.

“It’s true,” Stack replied.

“Well, that’s because I’m *extraordinary* fuckin’ company,” Jimmy said, smiling.

Stack laughed loudly.

“See?” Stack said, smiling, “right there, big ego.”

“Told you,” Jimmy said, still smiling. “It’s one of my better qualities.”

That got another laugh out of Stack, and then he held out his hand. Jimmy looked at it once, smiled, and clasped it. It turned into one of those quick one-armed handshakes men only gave people they actually meant something to, palms hitting, fingers locking, shoulders pulling in. Then Stack tugged him the rest of the way, and the two of them leaned into a brief one-armed hug, rough and easy and real. When they pulled apart, Jimmy sat back with a little smile still on his face.

“You’re all right, Stack.”

“I know,” Stack said, smiling.

Jimmy laughed.

The warm night outside Club Juke had gone soft and almost lazy around the edges, but inside, the place was still roaring. Jimmy and Stack were still out on the bench, the neon red of the sign trembling in the dark water beyond the road, the bass from inside rolling through the walls in steady pulses, when the front door suddenly slammed open, and Jamie came hurrying out like a man who had just seen something too ridiculous to keep to himself. He was grinning so hard he could barely hold it together.

“Man, get up,” Jamie said, breathless, already laughing. “Get up. Both of y’all. Come back inside.”

Jimmy straightened at once, alertness snapping into him. His briefly widened eyes went straight to Jamie’s face.

“What happened?”

Stack rose more slowly, already suspicious from the way Jamie was laughing. Jamie shook his head, one hand up like he couldn’t even say it properly.

“All I’m gon’ say is this,” Jamie said, still grinning. “I think Remmick done had way more damn alcohol than he should’ve had. Now come on.”

Jimmy was on his feet in a second.

“What?”

But Jamie just turned and headed back toward the door, laughing under his breath, and Jimmy and Stack followed him fast.

Scene Song: “You Can Do It” ~ Ice Cube

The second they got inside, the club hit them all over again—heat, light. The whole great timbered hall was alive, chandeliers burning gold overhead, colored flood lights rolling across the wooden walls and polished floor, bodies packed tight, drinks flashing in lifted hands, the bass hitting hard enough to rattle the air. And this time the song blasting through Club Juke was Ice Cube's *"You Can Do It,"* booming out with a filthy, celebratory confidence that already felt like it had gotten away from somebody. Jamie led them through the crowd at speed. The farther in they pushed, the louder the shouting got. Then Jimmy heard it—a chant, a whole crowd chanting in rhythm over the music.

"Go Remmick! Go Remmick! Go Remmick!"

Jimmy's brows flew up. Stack looked over at Jamie like, *"What the hell?"* Jamie was laughing too hard to answer. People had formed a huge circle in the middle of the floor, tight and noisy and leaning inward, everybody half-drunk, hollering, clapping, phones up, drinks sloshing. Jamie shoved his way through the ring with Jimmy and Stack right behind him, and the second Jimmy broke through into the center of the circle, he stopped dead and barked out a laugh so loud it was nearly swallowed by the music. Remmick was in the middle of the floor, and Remmick was dancing his ass off, not awkwardly, not halfway, not in some stiff, doomed, white-man-on-liquor kind of way. No, he was dancing perfectly with a hot Black chick who was giving him *everything* the beat demanded and then some.

Remmick was obviously drunk out of his mind because sober Remmick would've needed a lightning strike, two miracles, and written approval from the Pope to do any of this in public. But *drunk* Remmick? Drunk Remmick had apparently found a hidden department in himself and thrown the damn doors open.

He and the woman were locked into the music, close enough to look dangerous. At first, it was that same smooth, grounded rhythm, body-led and sharp, both of them stepping into the beat instead of chasing it. His shoulders rolled loose. His feet stayed clean and controlled. His hips caught the rhythm right. His hands guided without grabbing. She moved with him and against him, turning in and out of his space, and Remmick, impossibly, beautifully, drunkenly, matched her. The crowd was losing it. Mary, Sammy, Kevin, Bo, Delta Slim, Cornbread, and Pearline, who had shown up later, were all standing off to one side of the circle staring with complete shock and open delight, like they could not believe this was the same Irish bastard they knew. Jimmy, on the other hand, went full sports-arena hype man.

"*Let's fuckin' go*!" Jimmy shouted before clapping hard. "*Howzat*! Look at him! Look at the fuckin' Irish bastard *go*!"

Jimmy was laughing and hollering and clapping as if Remmick had just hit a game-winning shot at the buzzer. Every time Remmick caught another beat clean, Jimmy reacted like somebody had performed a magic trick in his bloodline. Stack was bent over laughing.

"No, no, no. That ain't real," Stack said with a smile.

Kevin had both hands on his head.

"Hell no, it ain't real! I *know* I'm not seeing this man get drunk and unlock premium ass content!"

“Man, who gave him *this* much confidence?” Sammy said, smiling.

Nobody answered because the dance got wilder. The woman slid closer towards Remmick, and the rhythm shifted with her. The sexy club groove sharpened. He adjusted without hesitation, like the liquor had erased every fear and left only instinct. She turned, her body angling against his, and the two of them moved into a more provocative, tighter rhythm, all hips, timing, control, and heat. The crowd roared louder. Jimmy slapped Stack on the shoulder hard enough to make him jolt.

“You *seeing* this shite?!” Jimmy exclaimed.

Stack laughed.

“I am, and I can’t fuckin’ *believe* it!” Stack said, smiling.

Then the woman spun, turned her back to Remmick, and bent into the music with a slow, wicked roll that made half the circle scream. Remmick moved right behind her, keeping time, hips working, shoulders loose, hands hovering just right, not stumbling, not missing, dancing with a smoothness that absolutely no one in that room had prepared for. The crowd blew up. Jimmy was practically beside himself now, clapping overhead and shouting like a little league dad watching his son win a baseball game.

“That’s my fuckin’ guy!” Jimmy exclaimed before laughing.

Stack nearly dropped his drink laughing. The woman turned back around, wrapped her arms around Remmick’s neck, and kept moving with him, both of them locked into the beat so tightly it looked choreographed. Remmick’s head dipped close to hers, the alcohol in him making him fearless, his whole face relaxed into this half-drunk, half-dazed smile that said he had no idea what was happening but intended to keep winning at it. Sammy leaned over toward Delta Slim and Cornbread, eyes still on the floor.

“Damn,” Sammy said, smiling. “If Remmick had danced like that outside Club Juke down in Mississippi, Smoke might’ve let his ass in.”

Delta Slim barked out a laugh. Cornbread laughed too, bent nearly double. Jimmy heard that and laughed even harder, still clapping like Remmick was his very own personal champion. Then Smoke came through the circle. He pushed through the crowd with that same solid authority of his, clearly having been somewhere farther back in the club and only just now hearing enough noise to know some foolery had reached a dangerous level. He broke through into the circle, looked toward the middle of the floor, and froze for half a second when he saw Remmick dancing like some liquor-powered hip-hop professional. Smoke looked away, let out one short, disbelieving laugh, and shook his head.

“Man,” Smoke said in a low voice.

Then he stepped forward. The crowd was still yelling, still clapping, still chanting, and Remmick was still in motion when Smoke cut in and grabbed him by the arm, pulling him out of the dance. The circle instantly turned on Smoke with a big communal chorus of disappointment.

“Awwww!” the crowd said in unison.

The woman stopped, hands on her hips, grinning like she was mostly amused. Remmick got yanked sideways, blinked hard, then looked at Smoke with drunk offense rising fast in his face.

“Why the hell did you pull me away?” Remmick asked.

Smoke gave him a flat look.

“Because you’re drunk as fuck and look like you’re about three seconds away from passin’ out on my floor.”

Remmick laughed right in his face.

“No I’m not.”

Smoke folded his arms.

“How many shots you had?” Smoke asked.

Remmick actually looked up at the ceiling for a second in the most absurdly thoughtful, drunk way possible, like maybe the answer was written in the rafters somewhere. Then he held up both hands, all ten fingers spread.

“Uh…” Remmick squinted, “this many?"

Then he laughed at his own answer. The crowd around them cracked up. Smoke rolled his eyes so hard it looked painful, and turned straight to Jamie, who was standing there laughing silently with one hand over his mouth.

“What the hell were you thinkin’, lettin’ him drink that much?”

Jamie lifted both hands with a smile.

“Man, I ain’t think he was gon’ get drunk like that. He had your new little sweet drink, and I guess he drank that thing fast. We all went upstairs to play poker, he ain’t wanna come, so I’m thinkin’ he just stayed down here keepin’ the bar in business.”

That made Kevin bark out a laugh again. Jimmy was still clutching his stomach from the whole scene. Then the DJ switched tracks. The heavy bass rolled and melted straight into Sean Paul’s “Like Glue.”

Scene Song: “Like Glue” ~ Sean Paul

The whole room reacted at once—cheers, movement, a fresh wave of energy slamming through the floor. And just as Smoke shifted his attention back to Remmick, the same woman came right back, grabbed Remmick by the hand, and pulled him away from Smoke like Smoke was an inconvenient coat rack. The crowd screamed with laughter.

“Oh shit,” Jamie said before laughing hard.

Smoke stared. Remmick, drunk enough now to obey rhythm before reason, went with her, and then they were dancing again. This time it was closer. *Hotter*. That grinding reggae rhythm took hold, and Remmick slid right into it like the alcohol had taught him fluent Sean Paul in under thirty seconds. She pressed in close, body moving slow and provocative with the beat, and Remmick matched her, his hips catching the rhythm perfectly, one hand settling at her waist as she rolled against him. Jimmy laughed so loud he had to brace a hand on Jamie’s shoulder.

“Shite, I have to say, this is the greatest fuckin’ night of my life,” Jimmy said before laughing, resulting in Stack, Sammy, and Jamie laughing as well.

“No, no, no, somebody stop this man!” Kevin said with a smile, between laughter. “He in there *gettin*’ it! He is in there gettin’ it like he got somethin’ to prove to rhythm *itself! Damn*!”

Even Smoke, who was no longer amused, looked briefly impressed despite himself before that gave way to full annoyance. The woman pulled Remmick in closer, wrapped one arm around his neck, and the two of them moved together in a way that would’ve had sober Remmick dying of embarrassment in twelve different languages. Then she kissed him—hard, passionate, immediate, right there in the middle of the floor while the crowd howled. Remmick kissed her back even harder, one arm tightening around her, and that was enough. Smoke stepped in, grabbed Remmick again, and yanked him bodily away from her. Remmick stumbled, looked up with drunk outrage, and said,

“Ow! Get off, Smoke! I’m having fun, what the hell are you doing?”

Smoke ignored him completely and looked at Jamie, Jimmy, Stack, and the others.

“Take his ass home. Now,” Smoke demanded.

Jimmy frowned sourly at once.

“Aw, come on, Smoke. Why are you ruin’ the Irish bastard’s fuckin’ victory lap?” Jimmy said.

Smoke shot him a look of disbelief and anger.

“Because if Sasha finds out I let Remmick get this fucked up in my club, she’s gon’ be furious with me. I’m not dealin’ with that woman lookin’ at me like I personally sponsored his damn collapse.”

That landed because everybody knew it was true. Right then, Remmick lifted a hand to his forehead and blinked several times. His face changed. The room, apparently, had caught up with him all at once. In a much lower voice, almost confused now, he muttered:

“The room’s spinnin’.”

Jimmy laughed and shook his head before stepping forward, then, while still smiling, took Remmick lightly by the arm.

“All right,” Jimmy said. “We’ll take him home.”

Jamie checked his watch, still grinning from the absurdity of all of it.

“Yeah,” Jamie said, “and it’s goin’ on two in the mornin’ anyway, so maybe that’s best.”

Smoke let go of Remmick with obvious reluctance, like he didn’t trust the man to remain vertical another three feet. The woman who’d been dancing with him gave a little laugh, touched Remmick’s arm once in parting, and disappeared back into the crowd with her friend, leaving behind perfume, heat, and what would probably become one of the funniest stories Club Juke ever had. Jimmy kept hold of Remmick’s arm while Stack moved in on the other side. Remmick frowned, shoulders heavy now, still trying to look offended about being removed from what he clearly considered an excellent time, even as his balance argued otherwise.

“I was fine,” Remmick muttered.

Skylar laughed.

“No, you weren’t,” Skylar said with a smile.

“Yes I was,” Remmick replied.

“You told Smoke you had ‘this many’ shots,” Kevin said, holding up ten fingers and nearly starting laughing all over again.

Remmick looked at him, blinked once, and seemed to reconsider existence. Jimmy, still deeply amused, leaned closer and murmured:

“You fuckin’ danced your arse off, kissed a gorgeous woman, nearly died of liquor, and got pulled off the floor by Smoke like a misbehavin’ fuckin’ schoolboy. Frankly, I’m fuckin’ impressed.”

That got a tired little laugh out of Remmick despite himself. Then the group turned and started easing him through the crowd toward the exit, the music still shaking the floor, lights still flashing, people still laughing and talking and dancing around them. Behind them Club Juke kept going, wild and bright and hot as ever, but the madness at the center of the circle had broken, dissolving back into ordinary nightlife. As they reached the doors, Jimmy looked back once toward the dance floor and shook his head with a grin of pure delighted disbelief. Then he pushed out into the warm Pelmont night with Remmick half-stumbling beside him,

Jamie and the others following, and the whole ridiculous, jaw-dropping, liquor-soaked legend of what had just happened still crackling behind them in the music.

The ride back from Club Juke started in complete, drunken foolishness. At first, Remmick was still upright enough to function, though "function" was doing heroic labor. He had slumped back into the Escalade with his black shirt half untucked now, his face was flushed from liquor and dancing and heat. For the first several minutes, he was in that deeply dangerous stage of drunkenness where every thought seemed not only worth saying, but hysterically funny before it even left his mouth, and Remmick was laughing, *constantly* not his usual little half-laugh through the nose either. No, this was real, loose, ridiculous, unguarded laughter, the kind nobody in that SUV had ever heard from him for this long without interruption. He kept laughing at things that were not funny, at mildly funny things, and at things that had stopped being funny five minutes ago but had somehow become funny again because his drunk mind kept circling back around to them. At one point, he got distracted by the seatbelt. He pulled it all the way out, let it zip back, then pulled it out again, as if he had discovered a mechanical snake. Jimmy stared at him from across the seat with a brow raised.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Jimmy asked.

Remmick looked at the belt in his hand, then at Jimmy, and started laughing all over again.

"It keeps grabbin' me," Remmick said.

Skylar laughed.

"It's a seatbelt, Remmick," Skylar said with a smile.

"I know what it is," Remmick said, still laughing. "It's just…suspicious."

That made Kevin lose it.

"Suspicious?" Kevin repeated. "Bruh, you beefin' with damn basic car safety now?"

Jamie and Skylar laughed. Remmick tried to buckle himself in again, missed the latch completely, then frowned at it as if the belt had moved on purpose.

"Oh, now that was deliberate," Remmick said in a low voice.

Jamie was laughing at the wheel.

"Nah, nah," Jamie said with a smile. "Leave that man alone. He back there fightin' damn infrastructure."

Remmick finally got the buckle clicked, looked down at it with drunken satisfaction, and gave it a slow nod.

"There," Remmick said. "You behave."

That sent Jimmy into a fresh laugh.

“You’re talkin’ to the fuckin’ seatbelt,” Jimmy said before lightly and briefly laughing again.
“I’m negotiatin’ with it,” Remmick corrected, then immediately laughed at his own wording like it was the smartest thing anybody had ever said.

And from there, Remmick just got sillier. He laughed when Kevin repeated “I’m negotiatin’ with it” back to him in a fake serious tone. He laughed when Stack asked if the seatbelt had won. He laughed at the lights outside the window because they were, in his opinion, “movin’ with a lot of confidence.” He laughed when Jamie changed lanes. He laughed at Jimmy’s chains reflecting in the window. At one point, he leaned slightly toward the glass, saw his own reflection, and smiled at it as if he’d just noticed he was in the car too.

“Oh, there he is,” Remmick said softly with a faint smile, “there’s Remmick.”

Jimmy put a hand over his mouth, trying not to laugh harder. Kevin twisted around in the passenger seat and pointed at him.

“Nah, see?” Kevin said with a smile, “this is the best drunk version of anybody I've ever seen. He in here talking to his damn self.”

Remmick looked at Kevin and laughed again. Then, for no reason anybody could determine, he pointed at Jimmy and said:

“You’ve got a tiny crown on, and somehow I’m the one being judged.”

Everyone, including Jimmy, laughed.

“Because you fuckin’ deserve to be judged,” Jimmy said with a faint frown and a half smile.

“No,” Remmick said, shaking his head and grinning. “No, I think I deserve applause.”

“For what?” Skylar asked with a faint frown and smile.

Remmick sat up a little straighter, lifted one finger, and said with absurd dignity:

“For commitment.”

“Man, commitment to what?” Jamie asked, smiling.
Remmick smiled lazily.

“To the evening.”

Jimmy, Jamie, and Kevin laughed. Remmick looked around the SUV as if he were suddenly hosting something.

“Did everybody have fun?” Remmick asked, smiling and gesturing with one hand.

“Why is he asking like he rented the damn place?” Kevin asked before sharing a laugh with Jimmy and Jamie.

“Because,” Remmick said, with drunken calm, “I feel responsible for the atmosphere.”

Jimmy and Skylar laughed. For another minute or two, Remmick stayed right there in that impossible, abnormal, liquor-loosened state, smiling too much, laughing too easily, tossing out weird little lines like a man whose dignity had clocked out and left him in the care of bad ideas. Then it shifted. Remmick's laughter cut off, his face tightened. He frowned and put one hand to his stomach. Jimmy noticed first, and his own laughter thinned as he looked over.

"What's wrong?" Jimmy asked with a faint frown.

Remmick swallowed once and blinked at nothing.

"I think," Remmick said slowly, his voice suddenly lower, "I'm going to throw up."

Jamie reacted instantly.

"Aw, shit," Jamie said before he yanked the Escalade hard over to the side of the road and braked.

That didn't help. In fact, it made everything much worse, considering Remmick only felt like he was going to throw up because he was nauseous. Remmick made a noise somewhere between a groan and a curse, and Jimmy was already lunging for the door handle. The back door flew open, and Remmick all but stumbled out of the SUV, dropping to his knees on the side of the road just in time. The sound of him vomiting into the grass hit the warm Pelmont night while everybody inside recoiled with identical expressions of sympathy and disgust. Kevin threw both hands up.

"Nope. Nope," Kevin said. "That's the turn. That right there is the turn."

Skylar and Jimmy both got out. Jimmy came around the side of the SUV, face twisted in reluctant concern, while Skylar hung back a little, one hand on the roof of the vehicle, already shaking his head. Remmick finished, breathing hard, one hand braced on the ground. Jimmy looked down at him.

"You all right?" Jimmy asked.

Remmick pushed himself up a little too fast, swaying as he rose. He blinked hard at the ground, frowned, and slowly shook his head.

"I feel..." Remmick swallowed, "lightheaded."

Then his legs gave. Remmick dropped backward, and Jimmy caught him with a sharp grunt, his arms hooking under him just before he hit the ground. Jimmy sucked his teeth and laughed in disbelief.

"Oh, for fuck's sake. You fuckin' weaklin'," Jimmy said, smiling.

Skylar laughed.

"Really, Jimmy?" Skylar said with a faint smile. "Like you could hold your liquor any better? How many drinks did you have tonight?"

Jimmy shifted Remmick's dead weight higher against him and looked over with a grin.

"Six," Jimmy replied, "and I can honestly fuckin' say I'm not drunk at all."

Skylar raised a brow. Jimmy straightened a little, smug as hell.

"That's because I'm a fuckin' professional," Jimmy added, "a champion. My bloodstream's got standards."

That got a real laugh out of Skylar. Jimmy looked down at the unconscious Irishman sagging in his arms.

"Told him not to go full bastard on the sweet drinks," Jimmy said with a faint smile and a shake of his head.

Skylar laughed.

"Bullshit," Skylar said with a smile, "you didn't tell him that."

"I implied it spiritually," Jimmy said with a faint frown and a half smile.

Skylar laughed again, and by then Jamie had gotten out too, still grinning while Kevin leaned halfway out the passenger window, watching like this was the finest possible ending to a club night. Jimmy adjusted his grip, then in one surprisingly clean move, Jimmy got Remmick up over his shoulder like he weighed far less than he actually did. Remmick slowly and lightly tried to sit himself up on Jimmy's shoulder while mumbling something softly, and then went completely limp and unconscious.

Kevin stared at Jimmy with eyes briefly widened and a half-smile.

"Oh, hell no. He strong too?" Kevin exclaimed as Jamie laughed.

"Of course I'm strong," Jimmy said with a faint frown and a half smile. "What sort of decorative Sir Lord do you think I am?"

Skylar and Jamie laughed. Jimmy laughed and carried Remmick back to the SUV. By the time they got to Sasha's house, the sky had gone deeper and quieter, the world holding that strange two-in-the-morning stillness where every sound felt either too loud or too far away. Jimmy was suddenly very glad to see the place dark, with no lights in the front windows and no movement upstairs. *Good*, Jimmy thought, *Sasha's asleep.* Jimmy got out with Remmick slung over his shoulder again and headed for the house while Jamie killed the headlights and Skylar watched with his arms folded.

"You sure you don't want help?" Skylar asked.

Jimmy glanced back with a faint frown and then laughed.

"With what? Walkin'?" Jimmy asked.

Skylar laughed under his breath.

“All right, Hercules,” Skylar said with a smile.

Jimmy let himself in with the key, moved through the quiet house as carefully as he could, and took Remmick upstairs to the guest room. The room was dim, soft moonlight barely touching the floor through the curtains. Jimmy crossed to the bed and unceremoniously tossed him onto it. Remmick bounced once onto the mattress, made a low sound of complaint, and then went still again. Jimmy stood over him for a second.

“You’ve had a very eventful evenin’, Irishman,” Jimmy said with a smile.

Then he reached into Remmick’s pocket, dug out his house keys, and left again. A few minutes later, he was back from Remmick’s place with a change of clothes tucked under one arm and a little bag of bath things in the other hand. He dropped the clothes at the end of the bed, set the bath stuff beside them, looked at Remmick one last time to make sure he was still breathing like a functioning member of the living dead, then nodded to himself and slipped back out. By the time Jimmy returned to his own house next door, the night had finally worn itself out. The next morning, he looked offensively fine.

Bright and early, with the sun already warm over Pelmont and the sky cloudless and blue, Jimmy went over to Sasha’s house in a white pullover T-shirt, black tracksuit pants with white stripes down the sides, his chains on, including the new **J** chain, his tiara in place, his platinum blond hair perfectly styled, and not one visible sign that he had been up into the dead of night hauling drunk Irishmen around and drinking with the guys.

Jimmy stepped into Sasha’s kitchen full of his usual morning energy and immediately found exactly the scene he had hoped for. Jimmy stopped in the doorway, then he purposely laughed —*loud*. The sound burst out of him so delightedly childish it was almost criminal. Remmick groaned and frowned without even lifting his head.

“*Damn* it, Jimmy, shut *up*,” Remmick said in a low but very annoyed voice.

At the kitchen island, Sasha looked up from the coffee she was fixing and immediately rolled her eyes at Jimmy, though there was a smile pulling at her mouth already.

“You know,” she said, setting one hand on the counter, “I’m still furious at Jamie for letting Remmick get that drunk. I mean, really, I specifically told Jamie to keep an eye on both you and Remmick, and he completely *fumbled* the damn ball.”

Remmick finally lifted his head. He looked rough, not sloppy rough, because somehow even in his suffering, he still had dignity. His silky short black hair was still in place, neat and smooth, like he’d very clearly showered and tried to reassemble himself into a respectable person before sitting down at Sasha’s table. He had on fresh clothes, dark and clean, but his face told the truth. His skin was a little pale, his eyes looked tired and sore, and there was a faint tightness around his mouth that said his head was pounding in several directions at once. He looked over at Sasha with guilty, sorrowful eyes.

“Sasha,” he said quietly, “I’m sorry about getting drunk. It’s not like I intended to. I didn’t realize I was getting drunk until…I was, and by then, apparently, I’d already made an absolute show of myself.”

Jimmy laughed and dropped into a chair at the table like this was the best breakfast entertainment he'd had all week.

"Oh, relax," Jimmy said. "It was fine. He didn't do anything too dangerous."

Remmick slowly turned his head and stared at him.

"That sentence," Remmick said, his voice dry with suspicion, "doesn't reassure me."

Sasha picked up the tray with the coffees and came over to the table, setting one mug down in front of Jimmy, another in front of Remmick, and keeping the last for herself before sitting between them. Remmick wrapped both hands around the mug like he needed the heat and the structure of it. Then he looked at Jimmy and said, very carefully:

"What did I do?"

Jimmy's smile grew at once.

"Oh, now that is a dangerous question," Jimmy replied.

"I'm serious," Remmick said. "I can't remember half of last night after a certain point. Maybe more than half. The whole thing's in pieces. So what did I do?"

Jimmy leaned back in his chair with the expression of a man being handed a stage.

"Well," Jimmy said, "first of all, you started merely lively, which in itself was deeply fuckin' unsettling."

Sasha laughed into her coffee. Jimmy held up one finger.

"Then you got in the SUV and spent a solid stretch of time laughin' at the fuckin' seatbelt."

Remmick frowned.

"At the *seatbelt*?"

"Aye," Jimmy said, smiling, amused

Jimmy nodded solemnly.

"You kept pullin' it out and lettin' it snap back like you thought it had a personal grudge against you. Then you told us it was suspicious."

Sasha burst out laughing. Remmick stared at Jimmy, then looked down at the table.

"No, no," Remmick said.

"Yeah, you did," Jimmy said with a brow raised.

"Jimmy, there's no way I said a seatbelt was suspicious."

“You absolutely fuckin’ did,” Jimmy said with a faint, brief smile.

Sasha smiled, shook her head, and took a sip of coffee.

“That actually does sound a little funny,” Sasha said with a smile.

Remmick looked at her in betrayal.

“Sasha, you’re supposed to be on my side.”

Sasha laughed.

“I’m on your side,” she said, “but I’m also allowed to enjoy how ridiculous this sounds.”

Jimmy leaned forward with a delighted smile.

“That was not even the best part,” Jimmy said. “Then you started talkin’ to the seatbelt.”

Remmick shut his eyes for a beat.

“Oh, God,” Remmick said in a low voice.

Jimmy was smiling too hard now to stop.

“You told it to behave,” Jimmy said with a faint frown and a half smile.

Sasha covered her mouth, laughing harder. Remmick opened his eyes again and gave Jimmy a look full of strained disbelief.

“See, now I think you’re just lying,” Remmick said with a faint frown.

“I’m fuckin’ not,” Jimmy said with an amused smile.

“Yeah, he’s not lying, Remmick,” Sasha said, still smiling. “There’s too much detail, so I know he’s telling the truth.”

Jimmy tapped the table once with one finger.

“And after that, the night really improved,” Jimny said with a faint frown.

Jimmy told him and Sasha about the shots, about Smoke asking how many he’d had, about Remmick looking up at the ceiling as if the answer might be written there, about him holding up all ten fingers and saying, in a deeply profound tone, *“Uh… this many.”* Sasha laughed so hard at that she had to set her mug down. Remmick squeezed his eyes shut tight and groaned with a shake of his head.

“I’m…so ashamed of myself,” Remmick said.

Jimmy laughed.

“You should be a little fuckin’ ashamed,” Jimmy said, half smiling, “not too much, though, because it was quality.”

Then Jimmy got to the dancing; he took his time there too, because of course he did, he described the crowd, the circle on the floor, the chanting, the woman. The way Remmick had somehow, impossibly, danced like he had been secretly training for that moment in some hidden room in Pelmont while everybody else thought he was just quietly haunted and dramatic all the time. Remmick’s face changed more and more with every sentence. At first, it was disbelief, then discomfort, then real, widening horror.

Finally, he just stared at Jimmy and said:

“Oh my *God*. I did *what*?”

Jimmy nodded, laughing again.

“You danced your fuckin’ arse off,” Jimmy said with a faint frown and a half smile.

“No, I—I don’t believe it,” Remmick said, faintly frowning.

“Fuckin’ believe it, because I watched it happen,” Jimmy said, smiling amused.

Sasha was openly smiling now, her eyes bright with amusement. Remmick looked appalled.

“I don’t dance like that,” Remmick said.

Jimmy sat back with a faint frown and half-smile.

“You did last night,” Jimmy replied.

“I would never act like that sober.”

Jimmy laughed.

“Exactly,” Jimmy said, smiling. “That’s what made it fuckin’ interestin’.”

Remmick shut his eyes tight again and frowned so deeply it looked like he was trying to crush the memory before it fully formed.

“I am so ashamed of myself,” Remmick said, frowning.

That made Sasha smile more softly. She leaned toward him a little.

“Why?” she asked.

Remmick looked at her, still mortified.

“Because apparently I turned into some drunken—wild—maniac in public,” Remmick said.

Sasha laughed softly and shook her head.

“Maybe, but I kind of wish you’d act like that sober. You’d be a whole lot more fun,” she said.

That made him blink.

“What?” Remmick asked.

She smiled over the rim of her cup.

“I’m serious,” she said, “that version of you, the bad-boy Remmick, the cursing Remmick, the tough-guy Remmick, that’s the version I’d like to see more often. Not all that sweet, soft, haunted romantic shit.”

Remmick just looked at her, then, despite himself, a faint smile touched his mouth.

“Really?” Remmick responded.

“Yeah, really,” Sasha said, laughing. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, I like sober you, but the wild one sounds like fun.”

Jimmy let out a bark of agreement.

“Yeah, I’m with her on that,” Jimmy said with a faint frown and a half smile.

Remmick glanced over at him, still half-horrified, half-flattered. Jimmy waved one hand between them.

“Loose, wild, sweary Remmick is way fuckin’ better than sober, calm, boring, soft, haunted-romantic Remmick. That version’s all broody eyes and melancholy shite. Last night’s version was fuckin’ excitin’.”

Remmick looked down at the table then, a little coy now despite the hangover, and laughed under his breath.

“Well,” Remmick muttered, “that’s a new and deeply dangerous thing to hear before breakfast.”

Jimmy laughed. For a few seconds, the mood softened. Then Jimmy, because he was Jimmy and could never leave well enough alone, looked up over his coffee and said casually:

“Did you tell Sasha about tonguin’ down that chick at the club?”

Remmick’s eyes shot up so fast it was almost violent. The look on his face said plainly: *Jimmy, I did WHAT?* At the exact same time, Sasha’s head whipped toward Jimmy, her eyes widening into a full glare.

“He did fucking what?!” Sasha exclaimed.

Jimmy looked at Sasha, then at Remmick, and that slow, wicked, mischievous smile spread across his face. Jimmy sat back in his chair, shook his head, and laughed.

“No,” Jimmy said. “I’m just kidding.”

Sasha let out a long breath of relief and leaned back in her chair.

“Oh, good.”

Remmick, on the other hand, didn’t laugh right away. He just stared at Jimmy with a faint, slow smile that said very clearly: *If I did do that, thank you for saying you were kidding that I did.* Jimmy caught the look, and, while Sasha wasn’t looking, he winked at him and gave him the “OK” sign with his hand before laughing with a shake of his head. Sasha took another sip of coffee, then said:

“That’s a relief, because if I even knew Remmick did that, I’d cut him up six ways from Sunday.”

Remmick shot her a brief, wide-eyed look of pure shock. Jimmy laughed so hard at that he had to set his cup down.

“That’s my sis,” Jimmy said proudly, “filled with fire just like her brother, Sir Lord Jimmy.”

Sasha rolled her eyes and smiled despite herself. Remmick looked between the two of them and muttered:

“You’re both completely insane,” Remmick said with a faint half smile and a shake of his head.

“And yet you’re sittin’ here drinkin’ our coffee,” Jimmy said with a faint frown and a half smile.

“Because I’m hungover and vulnerable,” Remmick said with a faint smile.

“Exactly,” Jimmy said, still smiling, “which means you need us.”

Remmick let out a soft, suffering groan and rubbed at his temple again. Sasha smiled, reached over, and slid the sugar closer to him.

“You’ll be all right,” Sasha said with a half smile.

“I don’t know,” Remmick said with guilty eyes and a shake of his head. “I may need to leave Pelmont altogether.”

Jimmy laughed.

“No fuckin’ chance,” Jimmy said, faintly smiling. “You’re not escaping this.”

That got a small, helpless laugh out of Remmick despite everything. The three of them sat there in the kitchen for a moment after that, coffee steaming between them, and the night before already beginning to turn from humiliation into legend. As the sunlight warmed the table, and one hungover Irishman realized he was never going to live any of this down, the

whole ridiculous aftermath of Club Juke settled into exactly what it was always destined to become: one more story they'd be laughing about for a long, long time.